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MEDIA CONTACTS

Jared Touchin (928) 221-9253
Jolene Holgate (928) 380-4174
Crystalyne Curley (928) 286-7918
nnlb.communications@gmail.com

Delegates encouraged by Congressman Luján's visit to the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project and town hall with Navajo veterans

FARMINGTON N.M. – On Thursday, Speaker LoRenzo Bates and other members of the Navajo Nation Council accompanied Congressman Ben Ray Luján (D – N.M.) as he met with officials from Navajo Agricultural Products Industry, regarding the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project. Following the meeting at NAPI headquarters, Rep. Lujan and several members of the Council participated in a town hall meeting in the community of Upper Fruitland to listen and discuss concerns that impact Navajo veterans.



PHOTO: Navajo Nation Council members, Congressman Ben Ray Luján, and NAPI officials at Block 9 organic farm area on Aug. 24, 2017.

Speaker Bates, Council Delegate Tuchoney Slim, Jr. (Bodaway/Gap, Coppermine, K'ai'Bii'To, LeChee, Tonalea/Red Lake), Bureau of Indian Affairs Navajo Region director Sharon Pinto, NAPI CEO Wilton Charley, and other officials discussed the need for the completion of Blocks 9, 10, and 11 to allow NAPI to operate at full capacity, which would total over 110,000 acres of farmland.

NAPI officials estimate that it would cost approximately \$124 million to complete Block 9, which encompasses over 12,000 acres. They also noted that the enterprise is not receiving adequate funding from the federal government despite their obligation to provide annual funding for operations and maintenance costs through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, in accordance with Public Law 87-483 passed by Congress in 1962. Over the years, O&M funding has decreased from \$24 million to a current low of \$3.3 million, which has led to deficiencies in the infrastructure at NIIP.

The deficiencies in NIIP's infrastructure led to a break in NIIP's water delivery system in May 2016 that resulted in a loss of over \$15 million in crop revenue, according to NAPI's CEO.

The Council members and Congressman Luján also visited the Gallegos Pumping Plant and a portion of Block 9, where the enterprise recently began producing organic crops for the first time. The products include melons, squash, potatoes, and onions using a drip irrigation system that was

constructed this year. NAPI officials said the organic program is proving to be successful thus far, and products are being harvested and offered in stores in several southwest states.

Following the visit, Congressman Luján commended NAPI officials for their work and dedication to making the NIIP successful and beneficial for the Navajo Nation.

“My visit demonstrated what many in New Mexico already knew – the Navajo Indian Irrigation Project and the Navajo Agricultural Products Industry are critical economic partners not just for the state but for the region as well,” said Rep. Luján. “I continue to be impressed by the work NAPI has done to open up markets for organically grown products – products that are grown using both traditional and innovative approaches. There is no question that the products grown here can compete both nationally and globally. I want to ensure that at the federal level we work to strengthen and expand those market opportunities.”

In April, the Navajo Nation Council’s Naabik’iyátí’ Committee created the NIIP Negotiation Subcommittee for the purpose of negotiating an MOA with the federal government regarding the funding and completion of the NIIP, to advocate for O&M funding, and other funding through the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act. The subcommittee members include Council Delegates Steven Begay, Benjamin Bennett, Kee Allen Begay, Jr., Leonard Tsosie, and Speaker Bates.

Following the visit to NAPI, Congressman Luján hosted a veterans town hall meeting at the Walter Collins Event Center in Upper Fruitland, where he and several members of the Council listened and responded to concerns including the need for housing, improved healthcare, veterans cemetery, and others.

Over 50 people were in attendance at the town hall including Speaker Bates and Council Delegates Leonard Tsosie, Amber Kanazbah Crotty, and Tuchoney Slim, Jr.

Delegate Crotty, who serves as a member of the Council’s Health, Education, and Human Services Committee which has oversight

authority of veterans issues, noted that the committee recently held budget hearings and directed the

Navajo Nation Veterans Administration to revisit their proposed budget for FY 2018 in order to prepare a budget that better reflects the growing need for services for Navajo veterans.

Among the numerous veterans who spoke at the event was the commander for the Fort Defiance Agency Veterans Organization Olin Kieyoomia, who recommended that Congress work to increase funding availability through the GI Bill to make education more accessible for more Navajo



PHOTO: Speaker LoRenzo Bates and Congressman Ben Ray Luján listen to local Navajo veteran Alvin Kee during a town hall meeting in Upper Fruitland on Aug. 24, 2017.

veterans, and to ensure that any possible repeal or changes to the Affordable Care Act does not negatively impact current health benefits for Navajo veterans.

Local veteran Alvis Kee also spoke about the need for better services for disabled veterans, particularly the need for funds and services that provide handicap accessibility within homes where veterans reside. He also addressed the need for the Navajo Nation to develop a veterans cemetery to help the families of veterans.

Speaker Bates added that when the Council considers the Nation's comprehensive budget for FY 2018 in September, the Council has the authority to issue conditions of appropriations to the Veterans Administration to hold the office accountable to provide better service to veterans.

Congressman Luján shared his gratitude for the veterans who took time to share their concerns and experiences and said he will continue to work with his congressional colleagues to amend or to introduce policies that help provide better services for Navajo veterans.

"One of the most important duties I have is to listen to the concerns and opinions of those I represent. The town hall with Navajo Nation veterans was a great chance to hear firsthand from veterans on topics ranging from the VA to national security," said Congressman Luján. "I always feel like I walk away from sessions like this better informed, and better prepared to fight for the interests of New Mexico when we debate the issues that matter in Congress."

Council members thanked the Congressman for taking the time to visit the Navajo Nation, adding that they look forward to continue working closely with his office to advocate and support issues that are important for the Navajo people.

Congressman Luján will conclude his visit to the area on Friday in Farmington, where he and Sen. Tom Udall (D – N.M) will host a roundtable discussion regarding the upcoming Farm Bill debate and other pending agricultural issues.

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